The Other Case for Transatlantic Integration

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Romania's recent EU accession increases the number of member countries diplomatically strained by a complex balancing act between the US and the EU. With its staunch commitment to both Atlanticism and Europeanism, Romania found its diplomacy torn by the EU-US rift caused by Operation Iraqi Freedom. It sought to keep itself on the shrinking — sometimes disappearing — common ground between the US and EU, and more fundamentally, between the need for security guarantees and the need to improve its economic performance. Serban Popescu, a Romanian Atlanticist, relates here how the problem has developed. He concludes that increased transatlantic cooperation on economic and security issues would narrow the perceived gap between the military and economic dimensions.

The case for transatlantic economic and security integration has been traditionally argued from the perspective of the benefits accruing to the US and Western European countries as a result of closer relations. But the recent waves of NATO and EU expansion to Central and Eastern Europe have brought in a novel category of states that can make a similar argument from a different perspective. These states keenly seek out security and economic development guarantees and are heavily influenced in their quest by historical challenges of a kind unlikely to strike a familiar chord with either Western European countries or the US.

The relative lack of transatlantic integration at the economic and foreign policy levels is likely to strain the diplomatic approach of the less influential countries that have joined the transatlantic community, hitherto based on a Euro-Atlantic synthesis that had seemed solid since both its halves — European and Atlantic — entailed looking westward. Among the new EU members, US-EU frictions inadvertently promote foreign policy trends based on inward-looking calculations of national gain, qualified commitment to wider regional projects, and loss of trust in the stability of the transatlantic community and in its capacity for defending their national interests. Given the security anxieties that some countries in Central and Eastern Europe still display, the stark choice between choosing to go along either with the EU or with the US can engender divergences in loyalties.

Since there are not enough treaty commitments and institutional channels to mitigate foreign policy disagreements among major transatlantic actors, smaller European countries may end up displaying a disposition to support projects on a purely contextual basis, as long as their national interest is served. While there is certainly nothing wrong with conducting diplomacy in order to advance the interests of one's country, the European project of integration is built on the belief that calculations of national interest are ultimately best served in a union.

This working assumption of the EU conveys no paradox and even less a repudiation of the concept of national interest. The European idea is that, unless

Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov, Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg, Foreign Minister (and Atlantic Club founder) Solomon Passy and EU-Affairs Minister Meglena Kuneva sign the European Union Entry Accord, April 25, 2005
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cast against the backdrop of shared values and perspectives, a country's pursuit of its own interests, conceptualized as a fundamentally solitary quest for transitory alliances whose basic tenets are open to revision, will lead, as it has so many times in the European history, to confrontation and loss of status for each and every European country. It will prove, in the end, detrimental to the very interest it sought to protect and advance.

Atlantic disunity undermines EU internal unity

In this respect, the possibility that newer EU members will try to navigate their way through the rocky rifts of the EU-US relations by seeking only provisional accommodation of largely inconsistent diplomatic stances does not indicate merely an ideological discomfort with the theoretical framework on which the European Union is modeled. It can spell a more practical threat: that the Union itself enters into a stage of slow fragmentation which can foreshadow a regional return to rank realpolitik, even if the administration in Brussels will try to uphold as long as possible a semblance of institutional unity.

As long as recent EU members will be forced to address American and Western European demands piecemeal, without feeling safe in the knowledge that there is a wider structure where potential head-on conflicts can be addressed and settled, they will unavoidably provoke acrimony in those European governments that view themselves as the founding members of and the driving force behind the Union. Senior EU members will feel entitled to demand loyalty from the very countries that they welcomed to the EU accession process. They will also tend to respond with dour criticism to recalcitrant behavior that threatens to frustrate their expectations. In the run-up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, French President Jacques Chirac rebuked the ten Central and Eastern European countries that signed the Vilnius letter in support of the U.S. position on Iraq by bitingly commenting that these countries were "badly brought up and somewhat insouciant about the dangers implied by allying themselves so rapidly with the American position." President Chirac singled out Romania and Bulgaria as "particularly irresponsible" and stated that the

Romania officially entered NATO on March 29, 2004. Image: Romanian soldiers carrying the Romanian and NATO flags.
BBC, Associated Press, 2007

two countries could not have found a better way to diminish their EU accession chances. There were certainly a host of reasons behind this statement that relate more to French positioning in the EU, its post-WWII legacy of decreasing influence, and its idiosyncratic relation to the US But there was also a clear feeling that the soon-to-be-members are not as strongly pro-EU as they should be.

Small countries in paradoxical situation

Romania is a good example of a European country whose strategic options are severely limited by the gaps in transatlantic integration. Minor power status is normally complemented by a restricted range of strategic options, but, in the present case, transatlantic disagreement further shrinks the already narrow space of diplomatic accommodation to zero, or literally somewhere below zero: the options are at times rigidly defined by an either-or choice between the US and the EU, with neither choice acceptable to the country but all space for compromise eliminated. As has always been the case in history, frictions among major powers tend to be amplified in minor countries to an extent that may appear excessive to the very parties engaged in the initial disagreement.

Romania illustrates the dilemmas of a country having to cope with an unwieldy diplomatic burden in times of transatlantic disagreement. Its post-Communist foreign policy has been built on the premise that national security is best served by the country's accession to both NATO and the EU. While the former was to provide the security umbrella, the latter was meant to guarantee economic stability and growth. Long before it formally joined NATO on March 29, 2004, Romania was an enthusiastic supporter of strengthening the alliance's role in regional conflicts, even when this implied souring relations with its neighbors, as was the case when Romania supported the 1999 NATO campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The desire to see NATO intensifying its operations in the region, in the hope that this will increase the country's security profile, should have been a clear indication to Brussels before the Iraq War that such expectations shape the Romanian diplomatic agenda.

At the same time, the country pursued a campaign to secure EU membership, a goal achieved at the beginning of this year. Economic integration was thought to be the natural counterpart to acquiring the security boons that flow from membership in NATO. But Operation Iraqi Freedom and the ensuing transatlantic disagreement put in doubt the expected coherence between the two dimensions. Security concerns already visible in the country's prior support of NATO operations in the region were magnified by a recent history of territorial instability. The modern state of Romania is a newcomer in historical terms. Formed in 1859 by the unification of the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, the state saw its territory repeatedly expand and decrease during the two world wars. A bleak national variant of Communism after 1945 compounded the difficulties of a rough start. The combination of these historical factors led Romania to emphasize the security side and thus come to strongly support the US decision to launch Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Romania became an EU member on January 1, 2007
Associated Press, 2007

The problem is structural

The staunch support for the operation is usually associated with the confrontational style of the Romanian President Traian Basescu. Announced in the wake of winning the presidential runoff, his surprisingly ambitious design to build a Washington-London-Bucharest security axis was frowned upon in Brussels (the President signally forgot to mention Brussels, Paris or Berlin). Yet the decision to support Operation Iraqi Freedom was taken in the previous Social-Democrat administration. As troubling as President Basescu's manner could be considered in Brussels, the decision to grant preeminence to security issues is not his innovation, but reflects a constant of post-1989 Romanian diplomacy. As a result of siding with the US, Romania was not shown the same lenience as that granted to regional neighbors, which gradually moved away from the US stance on Iraq. When Romania and Bulgaria were assigned the commissioner seats in the European Council, many saw more than mere coincidence in the fact that Bulgaria was bestowed the position of EU Commissioner for Customer Protection, while Romania was allocated the vastly irrelevant portfolio of EU Commissioner for Multilingualism.

The inherent danger in such situations is that the more countries such as Romania are scolded for their foreign conduct, the more they become convinced that EU membership is not as valuable as they initially thought and that complete loyalty should be required only if it is fully reciprocated. At the same time, geography indicates that as warm as Romanian-American relations can be, expected gains from the trade between the two countries cannot possibly offset the potential benefits of trade relations between Romania and the EU.

Structural solutions

The tension between security guarantees and economic development can be defused by an expansion of the transatlantic agreements. A common US-EU security policy structure would supply a framework where disputes could be aired and tackled. It would also serve to disprove the notion that the EU can provide security only in the form of peacekeeping and stabilization missions. Substantial elements of it could be developed in the coming period around NATO as an operating instrument and around joint security concerns such as WMD non-proliferation; the entirety of it is likely to require gradual evolution.

Similarly, a common transatlantic market would do away with the related notion that the US can only be a security provider to Central and Eastern Europe. The US and the EU still account for 50 per cent of the world's GDP, and 40 percent in terms of purchasing power parity. Eliminating unnecessary hurdles could boost trade to the point where newer EU members would come to appreciate the US as an economic partner, via their membership in the Union. An OECD study forecasts a GDP increase in the EU and the US of up to 3.5 per cent from unhindered trade. Complemented by strong security cooperation, such robust growth could dissolve the dilemma of choosing between being safe and being affluent. It could also make countries like Romania confident that the military and the economic dimensions of national security can once again become fused on their diplomatic agenda. □